COM-FSM Students Tackle Stigma and Help-Seeking at Mental Health Workshop

PALIKIR, Pohnpei – Twenty-nine College of Micronesia-FSM students came together on November 9, 2026, for an interactive Mental Health Awareness workshop. Mental health is a critical foundation for young people's overall well-being and success, especially while they navigate emotional, social and academic pressures that can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

The *Stronger Together* workshop aimed to break down cultural stigma surrounding mental health, equip students with practical tools to support one another, and show them how and when to seek professional help.

Held at the National Campus EMSS Learning and Training Room, the event was organized by Cooperative Research and Extension (CRE) in collaboration with Student Life and Counseling Services. Students were joined by CRE Youth Extension Specialist Rianna Richard, Student Life Coordinator Assistant Stephen Jr. Mara, and National Campus counselors Julia Martin and Nixon Soswa.

Rather than relying on lectures, the workshop was built around hands-on, discussion-based activities led by Student Life peer coaches MJ Russel, Aiden Pretrick, Genaeia Gallen, Shinae Eliam, Kimberly William, Eugene Baekalia, Shyann Yang, Nori-Ann Nowell, and Cassandra Jones with the counselors and the youth extension specialist providing professional insight and clarification in the wider group discussion. Having peers guide the teams created a relatable, low-pressure environment that encouraged open conversation.

Participants kicked off the session with a "This or That" movement icebreaker, led by two peer coaches, exploring everyday habits tied to lifestyle, work styles, and emotional support. The exercise quickly sparked honest reflections on how young people cope with stress. Many students shared that they tend to keep struggles to themselves rather than ask for help, largely out of a desire not to burden their parents or elders. Peer coaches closed the icebreaker with the takeaway that everyone relies on different self-care and coping strategies, and that recognizing those differences helps create a more empathetic and supportive community.

That theme carried into a two-round Mental Health Trivia competition focused on mental health literacy and Pacific Island cultural contexts. During group discussions, students pointed to generational gaps in how emotional struggles are talked about, noting that well-meaning advice from elders to simply "stay strong" or "push through," combined with the fear of being labeled "crazy," often keeps youth from reaching out.

For their efforts, the two top-scoring teams took home prizes, including a case of ramen from The Village Travel and $5 calling cards from Student Life.

In the final activity, teams scripted and performed short roleplay skits reacting to realistic signs of distress, such as a friend withdrawing from group hangouts and messages. While students demonstrated strong instincts for active listening and peer encouragement, facilitators observed that none of the groups had their characters connect the struggling friend with a trusted adult or professional counselor.

Building directly on that takeaway, Counselor Nixon Soswa closed out the learning portion of the day with a presentation on the importance of professional care, distributing contact forms and steps for students to reach the campus counseling office. He noted that students are already great at being there for their friends, reminding them that when things get too heavy to carry between friends alone, counselors are there for that exact reason. “We are here to support you,” he said.

The day’s message resonated well with students as some of the memorable shares included:

“You can be seen as a burden but that doesn’t make you one” said Monabel Bing, a first year Business student.

“If you keep things in, then that’s like shaking a soda bottle, eventually it explodes.” said peer coach MJ Russel.

Post-workshop surveys showed average scores rising from 75% to 93%. Participants rated the workshop as highly useful and requested future sessions on burnout, balancing work and academics, educational motivation, and the intersection of culture and mental health.

Students who would like to talk to someone can visit the Counseling Office at National Campus, open 8AM to 5PM, or contact counselor@comfsm.edu.fm/(691) 320-2480 EXT.196.



Workshop participants with Counselors and CRE youth extension specialist taking a group photo at the end of the workshop.



Workshop participants working in teams to plan their roleplay skits.